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ABSTRACT

Student attrition in the first grade of the eight public school districts serving New Orleans (Louisiana) and the River Region exceeded the statewide average for the school years 1983/84 through 1985/86 and black males are suffering severe, almost irreparable, damage to their academic potential. An analysis of enrollments, student failure, and attrition rates over the three-year period yields the following findings: (1) males and blacks are more likely than females and whites to fail; (2) the highest attrition rates occur in the Plaquemines (21.81 percent), St. Tammany (21.31 percent), and Orleans (20.30 percent) public school districts; (3) black males in St. Tammany are most at risk of failure; and (4) white females in St. Charles are least at risk of failure. The following recommendations are made: (1) mandatory prekindergarten and kindergarten are imperative to prepare students for first grade; (2) financial incentives and multiyear performance contracts are needed to recruit and reward high-quality teachers; (3) financial incentives are also needed to recruit and retain more black male teachers for preschool and first grade; (4) class sizes should be limited; (5) teacher aides should be provided; and (6) parent participation programs should be developed. Five tables of statistical data are appended. (FMW)

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# STUDENT ATTRITION IN THE FIRST GRADE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS SERVING NEW ORLEANS AND THE RIVER REGION DURING THE 1983-84 TO 1985-86 SCHOOL YEARS

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# STUDENT ATTRITION IN THE FIRST GRADE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS SERVING NEW ORLEANS AND THE RIVER REGION

## OVERVIEW

Student attrition in the first grade of the public school districts serving New Orleans and the River Region collectively exceeded the statewide average during the previous school years, strongly paced by failure in Orleans, Plaquemines and St. Tammany schools. Failure is pervasive and alarming.

Based on a new 3-year examination of student attrition in the Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John and St. Tammany Public School Districts, the study revealed that males and blacks are more likely to fail the first grade than females and whites, respectively, and:

(1) Highest first grade attrition rates occur in Plaquemines at 21.81%, St. Tammany at 21.31% and Orleans at 20.30%;

(2) Most at-risk student is the black male in St. Tammany;

(3) Least at-risk student is the white female in St. Charles.

Severe, almost irreversible damage to the academic potential of black students is occurring in the first grade -- and must be stopped and quickly reversed to increase their success in public schooling. Mandatory kindergarten and prekindergarten are both imperative, plus bonus/incentive pay to hire the best qualified and more male teachers for first grade and preschool classes.

## BACKGROUND

A new comparative analysis of student attrition in the first grade of the eight public school districts located in New Orleans and the River Region provides the following enrollment, student failures and attrition rates averaged over the past three school sessions of 1983-1984 to 1985-1986:

| PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS | FIRST GRADE ENROLLMENT* | STUDENT FAILURES | ATTRITION RATES |
|---|---|---|---|
| JEFFERSON | 4,956 | 838 | 16.91 |
| ORLEANS | 8,242 | 1,673 | 20.30 |
| PLAQUEMINES | 518 | 113 | 21.81 |
| ST. BERNARD | 753 | 97 | 12.88 |
| ST. CHARLES | 630 | 57 | 9.05 |
| ST. JAMES | 432 | 66 | 15.28 |
| ST. JOHN | 611 | 113 | 18.49 |
| ST. TAMMANY | 2,497 | 532 | 21.31 |
| **STATE** | **73,908** | **12,514** | **16.93** |

Collectively, the above eight public school districts enroll 25.22% (18,639) of all students statewide in first grade -- and account for 27.88% (3,489) of all student failures. The average attrition rates of Orleans, Plaquemines, St. John and St. Tammany exceed the statewide average. Jefferson is an eyelash below.

First grade enrollment and attrition data were obtained from the Louisiana State Department of Education. Four years ago the Department of Education began collecting information on student attrition under the aegis of the Annual Statistical Report of Education, conducted in accordance with Louisiana Revised Statute 17:22. The yearly statistics, tabulated in Item 19 of the state reporting document, were used for this study.

*See Appendix for "Breakdown of Enrollment by Gender and Ethnicity for First Grade Using Three-Year Averages."

## FINDINGS

An indepth examination of the nature and scope of student failure in the first grade of the eight public school districts serving New Orleans and the River Region revealed stark, major differences based on gender and ethnicity. Hence, in each school district, the following prevailed:

(1) Attrition rates of males exceeded females;

(2) Attrition rates of blacks exceeded whites;

(3) Black males are the most at-risk students, followed by black females and white males, and white females are the least at-risk.

The preponderance of male attrition over female and black attrition over white attrition in each public school district can be seen in Table I. The relationships hold statewide. Other minority students of American Indian, Asian and Hispanic origin are omitted because of limited statistics.

Attrition of white students is highest for males, and the same relationship exists for black students. In particular, the black male has the highest attrition rate in the first year of each public school district, as evidenced in Table I, and the same is true statewide.

Overall, the black male is the most at-risk student in the eight public school districts. Highest attrition rate is 36.80% in St. Tammany, and lowest is 17.95% in St. Charles. Orleans, which is the largest public school district in Louisiana -- and has the highest black enrollment -- has a black male attrition of 25.64%, just an eyelash below the statewide average of 25.72%.

## OBSERVATIONS

Based on a new examination of student attrition in the first grade of the eight public school districts of New Orleans and the River Region, male and black students are struggling with quite serious, pervasive academic hardship. In particular, black males are suffering from a severe, persistent attrition rate that is reducing dramatically long-term achievement -- even survival -- in education. Future underclass status, due to academic failure and dropping out, is too much a reality for black males in their first year of elementary public education.

Abatement of the pace-setting attrition rate of black males is urgent. Reversing the trend is likewise necessary to improve the future success and meaningful status of black males in the mainstream of society. Recent reports have sounded many alarms about the loss of black males in secondary schools and higher education. Yet, the onset of the decline, as this new study has revealed, really begins in first grade. For too many students the odds of a first-year washout are increased due to the lack of proper preschooling.

Academic achievement must be improved for all students in their first year. Survival decreases with unforgiving odds for marginal students who exit first grade. Dropping out becomes inevitable, and programs to save dropouts are belated -- and serve more as a social crutch than academic remediation.

Completion of kindergarten is not required in Louisiana. However, to enroll in first grade, a student must either pass a readiness examination or have attended an approved kindergarten for one school year. Prekindergarten is not required.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall reduction of student attrition in first grade is a prerequisite for the long-term improvement of public education statewide -- and the public school districts serving New Orleans and the River Region, which are Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John and St. Tammany.

The reduction must be based on steadily improving student achievement--and raising, not lowering, standards for promotion. Otherwise, ill-prepared and marginal students who leave first grade are hopelessly doomed to fail -- and ultimately become a secondary, if not sooner, dropout.

Preschooling is the best insurance for success in first grade. Mandatory full day kindergarten for 5-year olds and half day prekindergarten for 4-year olds are imperative. State funds for kindergarten and prekindergarten, plus enhancement of first grade, can be obtained by repealing every exemption to the state sales tax and designating the new revenues for preschooling and first-year programs. Immediate funding is then posible.

In addition to mandatory preschooling programs, improving the academic value of first grade calls for the following:

(1) Placing the best available teachers, the best of the most qualified, in preschool and first grade classes and rewarding them with multi-year performance contracts, including a major financial bonus for accepting an assignment in schools with historically high attrition rates;

(2) Recruiting more male teachers for preschool and first grade classes, especially black males for urban schools, using a supplemental hiring bonus and extra stipends to ensure long-term employment;

(3) Limiting the size of first grade classes to no more than twenty students per teacher and kindergarten/prekindergarten classes to fifteen students;

(4) Establishing a pool of teacher aides at each school site to assist first grade and kindergarten/prekindergarten teachers with their classroom activities; and

(5) Expanding information programs and classes to help parents handle better the difficult transition of their children from home to school, plus helping their children with homework.

Admittedly, the recommendations delineated in this study are not all-inclusive. Improving the first grade experience of public education also requires a concommitant upgrading of instructional materials; textbooks; training, certification and evaluation of teachers and principals; and reliable and sound funding. The recommendations are interdependent -- and they are similarily important. Immediate enhancement of first grade and preschool education is needed. Survival of the graduating classes of the 21st century is at stake.

## POSTSCRIPT

A parallel analysis of student failure in the other major metropolitan areas of Louisiana is summarized in the Addendum, entitled "Comparison of the Attrition Rates for White and Black Students in First Grade of the Major Public School Districts of Louisiana Based on Three-Year Averages for 1983-1984 Through 1985-1986 School Years."

TABLE I

COMPARISON OF ATTRITION RATES FOR WHITE AND BLACK STUDENTS IN FIRST GRADE
PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT OF NEW ORLEANS AND THE RIVER REGION
THREE-YEAR AVERAGES FOR 1983-1984 THROUGH 1985-1986 SCHOOL YEARS*

| SCHOOL DISTRICT | MALE STUDENTS | FEMALE STUDENTS | WHITE STUDENTS | WHITE MALES | WHITE FEMALES | BLACK STUDENTS | BLACK MALES | BLACK FEMALES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| JEFFERSON | 19.74 | 13.74 | 12.38 | 15.05 | 9.37 | 24.85 | 28.07 | 21.27 |
| ORLEANS | 24.14 | 16.00 | 11.01 | 13.08 | 8.43 | 21.43 | 25.64 | 16.77 |
| PLAQUEMINES | 24.55 | 18.75 | 20.24 | 23.20 | 17.09 | 23.86 | 25.81 | 21.69 |
| ST. BERNARD | 15.88 | 9.14 | 11.80 | 14.21 | 9.39 | 22.03 | 30.00 | 13.79 |
| ST. CHARLES | 11.04 | 6.89 | 5.96 | 8.25 | 4.44 | 14.35 | 17.95 | 10.83 |
| ST. JAMES | 17.70 | 12.62 | 8.00 | 10.61 | 6.78 | 18.36 | 20.75 | 14.97 |
| ST. JOHN | 22.93 | 13.80 | 12.30 | 17.60 | 6.72 | 23.00 | 26.88 | 18.86 |
| ST. TAMMANY | 24.05 | 18.21 | 18.17 | 21.17 | 14.85 | 34.36 | 36.80 | 31.80 |
| LOUISIANA | 19.66 | 13.90 | 12.17 | 13.70 | 9.52 | 22.42 | 25.72 | 18.99 |

*Source: Louisiana State Department of Education

TABLE II

COMPARISON OF THE PERCENTAGE OF WHITE AND BLACK STUDENT FAILURES FOR FIRST GRADE PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT OF NEW ORLEANS AND THE RIVER REGION THREE-YEAR AVERAGES FOR 1983-1984 THROUGH 1985-1986 SCHOOL YEARS*

| SCHOOL DISTRICT | MALE STUDENTS | FEMALE STUDENTS | WHITE STUDENTS | WHITE MALES | WHITE FEMALES | BLACK STUDENTS | BLACK MALES | BLACK FEMALES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| JEFFERSON | 61.58 | 38.42 | 39.50 | 25.42 | 14.08 | 54.77 | 32.46 | 22.32 |
| ORLEANS | 62.82 | 37.18 | 4.90 | 3.23 | 1.67 | 33.53 | 56.60 | 90.14 |
| PLAQUEMINES | 59.88 | 39.82 | 60.47 | 36.87 | 23.60 | 37.17 | 20.94 | 16.22 |
| ST. BERNARD | 66.32 | 33.33 | 82.13 | 53.95 | 28.18 | 13.06 | 9.28 | 3.78 |
| ST. CHARLES | 62.57 | 37.43 | 40.35 | 25.73 | 14.62 | 59.06 | 36.26 | 22.81 |
| ST. JAMES | 60.61 | 39.39 | 15.66 | 10.10 | 5.56 | 84.34 | 50.51 | 33.84 |
| ST. JOHN | 63.42 | 36.58 | 26.25 | 19.17 | 7.08 | 73.45 | 43.95 | 29.50 |
| ST. TAMMANY | 59.84 | 40.23 | 68.11 | 42.23 | 25.88 | 31.58 | 17.29 | 14.29 |
| LOUISIANA | 61.16 | 38.84 | 37.21 | 22.22 | 13.66 | 60.60 | 36.34 | 24.48 |

*Source: Louisiana State Department of Education

TABLE III

COMPARISON OF ENROLLMENT AND FAILURES FOR FIRST GRADE WITH STATEWIDE TOTALS
PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT OF NEW ORLEANS AND THE RIVER REGION
THREE-YEAR AVERAGES FOR 1983-1984 THROUGH 1985-1986 SCHOOL YEARS*

| SCHOOL DISTRICT | FIRST GRADE ENROLLMENT | PERCENTAGE STATE TOTAL | FIRST GRADE FAILURES | PERCENTAGE STATE TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| JEFFERSON | 4,956 | 6.71 | 838 | 6.70 |
| ORLEANS | 8,242 | 11.15 | 1,673 | 13.37 |
| PLAQUEMINES | 518 | 0.70 | 113 | 0.90 |
| ST. BERNARD | 753 | 1.02 | 97 | 0.78 |
| ST. CHARLES | 630 | 0.85 | 57 | 0.46 |
| ST. JAMES | 432 | 0.58 | 66 | 0.53 |
| ST. JOHN | 611 | 0.83 | 113 | 0.90 |
| ST. TAMMANY | 2,497 | 3.38 | 532 | 4.25 |
| LOUISIANA | 73,900 | 100.00 | 12,514 | 100.00 |

*Source: Louisiana State Department of Education

ADDENDUM

COMPARISON OF ATTRITION RATES FOR WHITE AND BLACK STUDENTS IN FIRST GRADE OF THE MAJOR PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF LOUISIANA BASED ON THREE-YEAR AVERAGES FOR 1983-1984 THROUGH 1985-1986 SCHOOL YEARS*

| SCHOOL DISTRICT | MALE STUDENTS | FEMALE STUDENTS | WHITE STUDENTS | WHITE MALES | WHITE FEMALES | BLACK STUDENTS | BLACK MALES | BLACK FEMALES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CADDO | 21.60 | 16.90 | 10.94 | 13.07 | 8.54 | 25.02 | 27.52 | 22.23 |
| CALCASIEU | 18.08 | 13.22 | 13.74 | 15.45 | 11.85 | 20.42 | 24.09 | 16.37 |
| EAST BATON ROUGE | 18.31 | 13.11 | 9.35 | 11.42 | 6.92 | 20.88 | 23.95 | 17.58 |
| LAFAYETTE | 17.81 | 14.38 | 11.22 | 13.24 | 9.09 | 27.22 | 29.69 | 24.56 |
| MONROE | 17.21 | 11.72 | 7.73 | 10.43 | 4.76 | 16.22 | 18.93 | 13.36 |
| RAPIDES | 19.87 | 12.88 | 13.38 | 16.17 | 10.04 | 20.73 | 25.41 | 16.28 |
| LOUISIANA | 19.66 | 13.90 | 12.17 | 13.70 | 9.52 | 22.42 | 25.72 | 18.99 |

*Source: Louisiana State Department of Education

APPENDIX

PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF NEW ORLEANS AND THE RIVER REGION

BREAKDOWN OF ENROLLMENT BY GENDER AND ETHNICITY FOR FIRST GRADE
USING THREE-YEAR AVERAGES FOR
SCHOOL YEARS OF 1983-1984 TO 1985-1986*

| PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT | FIRST GRADE ENROLLMENT | PERCENT MALE STUDENTS WHITE | BLACK | OTHER+ | TOTAL | PERCENT FEMALE STUDENTS WHITE | BLACK | OTHER+ | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| JEFFERSON | 4,956 | 28.55 | 19.55 | 4.64 | 52.74 | 25.40 | 17.73 | 4.14 | 47.27 |
| ORLEANS | 8,242 | 5.01 | 44.82 | 3.00 | 52.83 | 4.02 | 40.58 | 2.57 | 47.17 |
| PLAQUEMINES | 518 | 34.88 | 17.95 | 0.71 | 53.54 | 30.05 | 16.02 | 0.32 | 46.40 |
| ST. BERNARD | 753 | 47.66 | 3.98 | 1.81 | 53.47 | 40.99 | 3.85 | 1.64 | 46.48 |
| ST. CHARLES | 630 | 32.70 | 18.57 | 0.42 | 51.69 | 28.52 | 19.05 | 0.79 | 48.36 |
| ST. JAMES | 432 | 15.35 | 36.73 | 0.15 | 52.24 | 13.66 | 33.95 | 0.08 | 47.69 |
| ST. JOHN | 611 | 20.51 | 30.39 | 0.44 | 51.34 | 19.48 | 28.64 | 0.49 | 48.61 |
| ST. TAMMANY | 2,497 | 42.58 | 10.00 | 0.35 | 52.93 | 37.20 | 9.57 | 0.29 | 47.07 |
| LOUISIANA | 73,908 | 27.45 | 23.92 | 1.31 | 52.68 | 24.30 | 21.83 | 1.19 | 47.32 |

*Source: Louisiana State Department of Education - Annual Statistical Report of Education
+Other is Minorities of American Indians, Asians and Hispanics